GEORGE ELIOT

Middlemarch

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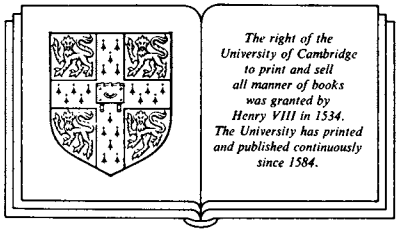

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Chapter 1

The context of the novel

From rebel to sage

In the last years of the 1860s, when she began to conceive and then draft this monumental novel, George Eliot occupied a position of great eminence in English intellectual life. There is irony in her eminence. Two decades earlier, when she first left her home in the English Midlands and entered London intellectual circles, she had been a free-thinking, even subversive, radical who seemed destined to remain at odds with the dominant values of her society. Moreover, when in 1853 George Eliot decided to join her life to that of George Henry Lewes, she estranged many others who tolerated the free thinking but shuddered at the free living. Lewes, a versatile and well-known man of letters, had been unable to gain a divorce from his wife, and when his intellectual companionship with George Eliot grew into an emotional one, the two became the subject of widespread gossip and calumny. In both polite society and much of the artistic and intellectual community, George Eliot was deemed unfit to be received. All the more remarkable, then, that at the time of composing *Middlemarch* she had won a loyal and reverent audience which included the Queen of England, and had achieved the position of a moral sage, a position only confirmed and extended by the success of *Middlemarch.*

And yet, when she began to write the novel, she found herself in a condition of artistic uncertainty. For a long time, she was unsure of the subject of her novel; she was even unsure whether her next ambitious work would take the form of a novel. As it happened, her uncertainties turned out to be extremely fruitful. The great size of the imaginative *Middlemarch* owes much to the strains upon the imagination of its author, strains which pulled her in many directions and which obliged her to stretch the grasp of her novel. Two tendencies,

in particular, reveal the conflicting pressures that underlay the conception of the project. The first is George Eliot's aspiration to what we may think of as the *universalist* vision, the grand encompassing panorama that would survey the history of European civilisation. The synoptic vision, which had long been an attraction to her, shows itself in the inclination to make a fictional world out of distant historical moments and to see in them the manifestation of some essential human aspiration and some fundamental conflict. The novel *Romola* (1863), which took as its subject the religious and political life of Renaissance Florence, epitomized George Eliot's interest in the large-scale historical synthesis – for instance, the synthesis of classical and Christian culture – as it stands illuminated at some turning-point in European history. Before beginning work on *Middlemarch*, George Eliot was contemplating a long poem about Timoleon, the Greek defender of freedom, which would have addressed the problem of the "influence of personal character on destinies." This is precisely the kind of highly general historical issue that frequently stirred her imagination.

Opposed to her universalism stands the second recurrent tendency in George Eliot's imaginative life, namely her regionalism, her abiding attraction to local experience, especially the local experience of the English Midlands where she passed her childhood. It has been said of George Eliot that the fundamental rhythm of her artistic life comprised a movement between the universalist and regionalist ambitions, but, however true this may be of her earlier work, it seems clear that in *Middlemarch* the two tendencies meet – not always comfortably. On the one hand, the novel preserves the synoptic ambition expressed in its opening sentence, the desire to study the "history of man" as it displays itself "under the varying experiments of Time." On the other hand, the book gives meticulous attention to the accidents and incidents of provincial life in nineteenth-century England.

To speak of "regionalism" in George Eliot's work is not only to speak of region in the spatial sense – a particular corner of the map of the world. It is also to speak in the temporal

sense – a region of time, which in the case of *Middlemarch* spans a brief period from the late 1820s to the early 1830s. George Eliot trained herself to be one of those rare minds capable of surveying the length and breadth of human endeavour. Why then did her widely observing eye light on this piece of English soil at this season of its history?

Religion and science

Middlemarch is an historical novel that gives painstakingly detailed attention to events that had occurred forty years before its composition. Yet, consistently throughout the book, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, the historical narrative is haunted by the contemporary situation of England, the condition of the nation in the years 1868 to 1871. To talk about the context of the novel is inevitably to talk about two contexts: the context of the writing (George Eliot in 1869) and the context of the written (her characters in 1829); and it is necessarily to see the deep connections between these two moments in nineteenth-century life.

Two events of the 1860s absorbed the social attention of George Eliot and drew her universalizing mind toward the special concerns of a nation and a village. The first of these was the passage of the Second Reform Bill in 1867, which extended the suffrage to include most of the working men of England. Like others of her generation, George Eliot saw the bill as marking a decisive threshold in the social history of England, and in her case it directed her imagination back to the period of the First Reform Bill which was finally passed in 1832.

The sense of impending social change of uncertain magnitude greatly unsettled George Eliot, prompting her to reflect on the concept of reform not just in the political sense but in a more extended sense that included scientific, political, religious, and personal change. In *Middlemarch* itself the fates of Lydgate the doctor, Ladislaw the artistic dilettante, Middlemarch the community, and Dorothea Brooke the latter-day St. Theresa are all understood in terms of the opportunities and hazards of reform.

What makes this issue so charged in the case of George Eliot is that the provocations of reform became more than simply useful subject-matter for a new novel. They became the occasion for her to reconsider the movement of her own changing intellectual life. *Middlemarch* juxtaposes those two distinct moments – the passage of the First and Second Reform Bills, 1832 and 1867 – but it also recapitulates much of George Eliot's own history between those dates, a history of changing attitudes toward change itself.

As an adolescent in the 1830s George Eliot held to a strict form of Evangelical piety, a quality of faith so rigorous that it led her to extreme gestures of self-denial. When Dorothea Brooke, in the first chapter of *Middlemarch*, refuses to accept her dead mother's lovely jewels even as she feels the splendor of their beauty, and when she looks forward to giving up her horseback riding that she enjoys so passionately, she is an image of the young George Eliot who turned so firmly from the allure of the senses to the purity of the spirit. All the more remarkable, then, is George Eliot's movement from orthodox piety to religious radicalism. A sternly devout provincial young woman of twenty, by the age of thirty-five she had established herself as a significant presence in the radical intellectual life of London and had translated two of the most serious challenges to Victorian faith, David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1854).

Of the two, the work of Feuerbach (1804–1872) is the more important to George Eliot's literary and intellectual development. Its great sceptical claim is that religion is a human construction which has prevented social progress by diverting reverence from humanity itself to the theological images it has made: "man in relation to God denies his own knowledge, his own thoughts, that he may place them in God." The urgent task, then, is to take back what has been surrendered to God, and so Feuerbach urges "the realization and humanization of God – the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology." Humanity, not divinity, must become the object of worship. In a bitterly caustic essay of 1855, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," George

Eliot accused the preacher John Cumming of a "perversion" of "true moral development" through his "substitution of a reference to the glory of God for the direct promptings of the sympathetic feelings." With Feuerbach she held that human capacities are the source of any divine promise, and in a letter she spoke of the fundamental belief that had allowed her to become a writer of fiction, "namely, that the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and that the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e. an exaltation of the human)."

One of the main centers of moral value in *Middlemarch* is located in the Reverend Camden Farebrother who savors his pipe, enjoys his card-playing, and takes unabashed delight in the natural and human environment that surrounds him. Early in the work we learn that Farebrother realizes he is in the wrong profession, his devotion to the visible universe struggling against his obligation to serve an invisible God. Farebrother is an emblem of the great historical transition sketched out by Feuerbach; he is caught between a theological tradition and a modern anthropology; and his moral distinction for George Eliot resides in his ability to live as a theologian who worships the God in, not above, humanity and the natural world.

The liberation of humanity from a jealously oppressive theology, the creation of the "religion of humanity" – these are the animating ideals of George Eliot's early radicalism, and in the early 1850s the ideal was confirmed and strengthened through her encounter with the thought of Auguste Comte (1798–1853). Comte had elaborated a scheme of development according to which human history passes through three stages: the age of theology, the age of metaphysics, and the dawning age of positive science. In 1851 George Eliot described Comte's "positivist" belief that "theological and metaphysical speculation have reached their limit, and that the only hope of extending man's source of knowledge and happiness is to be found in positive science, and in the universal application of its principles." G. H. Lewes was one of Comte's earliest sympathetic readers in

England, and his keen enthusiasm for positivism would itself have been enough to rouse George Eliot's interest. But even apart from the strong influence of Lewes, George Eliot came into significant contact with other English Comteans, including Richard Congreve and Frederick Harrison, and although it would be a mistake to see her as a slavish follower of the positivist doctrine, it is essential to acknowledge that, like Feuerbach, Comte offered her certain fundamental intellectual insights that she studied, criticized, transformed, and then absorbed.

Certainly the most important recognition that she took from Comte was that after the theological age of faith in the supernatural and the miraculous, and after the metaphysical age of faith in forces, causes and essences, it was now possible to live fully in the age of science, which enjoins us not to look behind the veil of experience, but rather to give ourselves to a new revelation, the revelation stirred by the "patient watching of external fact":

> The master key to this revelation, is the recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world – of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organization, our ethics and our religion. It is this invariability of sequence which can alone give value to experience and render education in the true sense possible.
>
> ("The Influence of Rationalism", 1865)

What she calls "the supreme unalterable nature of things" is the basis not only for a new science, but for a morality, and indeed for a new fiction.

The sharp contrast in *Middlemarch* between the dusty cleric Casaubon and the vibrant doctor Lydgate, and the associated contrast between the futile search for an obsolete truth and the fertile quest for a new truth, owe a great deal to George Eliot's reading of Comte. As James Scott has persuasively shown, Casaubon is the emblem of Comte's Metaphysical Man, committed to discovering secret origins and forces, while Lydgate is a figure for the new positive scientist, who will work through "careful observation and inference." Both are ambitious questers – Casaubon pursuing the Key to All

Mythologies, and Lydgate in search of the "primary tissue" in human biology. Neither is in a position to reach the ultimate ground, the deep foundation. But as Will Ladislaw disdainfully observes, Casaubon's ignorance of the new German biblical criticism, work of the sort translated by George Eliot, makes his project obsolete before he begins; Casaubon has not understood that the study of mythology, like the study of chemistry, is a science in constant change. On the other hand, Lydgate has grasped the principle of positive inquiry that his fellow physicians archaically deny and that lets him gesture toward the future of medical science.

Yet, Lydgate's failure is as thorough as Casaubon's, a fact that has always troubled readers of *Middlemarch* who have wanted to see in the energetic young physician a figure of modern heroism. George Eliot's refusal to allow Lydgate the heroic outcome is no idle perversity. It is a refusal tightly connected to other commitments that make George Eliot such a complex thinker and *Middlemarch* such an intricate book.

The powers of the past

If there is a single leading cause of Lydgate's failure, it is his inability to acknowledge and to embrace the past. He carelessly discards his aristocratic pedigree, and in denying his family history, he not only antagonizes relations who might help him in his financial need; but he also fatally misunderstands the attraction he holds for his wife Rosamond. Still more seriously, Lydgate disowns his romantic history, which provides the most melodramatic episode in the book. The young doctor's infatuation with the actress Laure; his sudden uncontrollable declaration of love; his shock when he learns that she has intentionally killed her first husband – all these Lydgate dismisses as isolated moments of self-abandonment that are unrepeatable and therefore unthreatening. The narrator of *Middlemarch*, however, heavily underscores Lydgate's inability to escape the precedent of his trying affair with Laure. When he abruptly proposes marriage to Rosamond, despite all his resolves to place his profession well before his family, Lydgate enacts George Eliot's version of

Marx's dictum, that those who ignore the past are condemned to repeat it.

The supreme value of the past is the countervailing pressure to George Eliot's radicalism. It is what separates her from the liberationist rhetoric found in Feuerbach and Comte, and also what injects ambiguity and dissonance into her vision of social change and political hope. As she put it in 1851, Comte's notion of a triumphant progress from theology to metaphysics to positive science gives only one aspect of the cultural wholeness we must seek, the other aspect being a generous retrospective glance on the history of culture. "Every past phase of human development," she writes, "is part of that education of the race in which we are sharing; every mistake, every absurdity into which poor human nature has fallen, may be looked on as an experiment of which we may reap the benefit" ("The Progress of the Intellect," 1851). There can be no question then of smashing the idols of past superstition. Those idols were products of the same yearnings, the same hopes, that animate the nineteenth century.

The rise of science, argued G. H. Lewes, has left the modern mind with two choices: to extinguish religion or to transform it. George Eliot, like Lewes, chose transformation over extinction; and transformation meant that, while the supernatural canopy of divine miracle would be abandoned, the persistent human impulse toward faith and reverence would remain – only now, it would be a reverence, not for an unseen God, but for the visible humanity which has developed the idea and the image of God. For George Eliot this implies an abiding respect for religions of the past, because "all the great religions of the world historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy – they are the record of spiritual struggles which are types of our own." Tradition, then, is not a constraint; it is both the source of the present and the mirror of its difficulties; and the radical in this view is the one who plans for the future by studying the past.

The political implications of this attitude had begun to manifest themselves in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, published in 1866, and after the passage of the Second Reform Bill in

1867, George Eliot's publisher John Blackwood suggested that she deliver some urgent advice to the working men who now, through the extension of the vote, stood to gain such power. The "Address to the Working Men, by Felix Holt" appeared early in 1868, and it contains reflections on the problem of reform that are highly pertinent to an understanding of *Middlemarch*.

"I expect great changes," announces Felix, "and I desire them. But I don't expect them to come in a hurry." He expects them rather in their due time. Here is the metaphor that guides George Eliot's reflections on reform, the metaphor of moral maturity, of political ripeness – most generally the metaphor of society as a vital organism obeying its own laws of growth and decline. The prosperity and well being of England, says the fictional Felix to the real workers, is a "vast crop, that like the corn in Egypt can be come at, not at all by hurried snatching, but only by a well-judged patient process." And in another strategically motivated image, Felix suggests that "society stands before us like that wonderful piece of life, the human body, with all its various parts depending on one another, and with a terrible liability to get wrong because of that delicate dependence."

George Eliot's impersonation of the eloquent artisan Felix Holt gave great pleasure to her cautious publisher Blackwood, but it is doubtful whether it gave much delight to those newly enfranchised workers who were eager to test the powers of reform. Her organicist social theory emphasized not rights but duties; it celebrated not freedom but renunciation, renunciation for the sake of that vital body, the community, that alone gave life to the various parts. The working class may be one strong limb of that body, a limb now strong enough to kick, but in Felix Holt's vision the task for the working class is to learn not how to kick but how to walk, carrying the interdependent body where it wants to go.

There is no need to doubt George Eliot's acceptance of radical change, but it is to be a slow radicalism, slow enough to avoid battering down the monuments of the past. So Felix Holt cautions the workers against giving a "fatal shock" to the "living body" of society; he warns against tampering with

the existing system of class distinctions; he insists that "we have to submit ourselves to the great law of inheritance." For George Eliot the greatness of that law lies in what she calls "the common estate of society," by which she means chiefly the *cultural* acquisitions from the past: "that treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling and manners, great memories and the interpretation of great records, which is carried on from the minds of one generation to another." The thought that the emancipated workers might trample on the great books, soiling them beyond recovery – this is the spectre that haunts George Eliot. It is what leads her to make *education* the center of her reformist program, inspired by the thought that when the working class can be educated in the beauties of art and science, it will make its radical reforms with care and patience, stepping carefully around the flowers of the past.

The Woman Question

One of those flowers of the past is called Woman. Even more than she felt the provocation of the advancing working class, George Eliot felt, and suffered from, the provocation of the Woman Question. This is the other great question of the late 1860s that obliged her to confront the issue of reform. The drive for extension of the suffrage to women, the movement to found a woman's college, the general and contentious question of separate spheres for men and women – there was no ignoring such concerns, especially for a woman such as George Eliot whose own life seemed such a sharp challenge to the conventions of gender.

After her high-minded attack on "evangelical teaching" was printed in the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot wrote to Charles Bray asking him to keep the sex of the author a secret. "The article," she notes, "appears to have produced a strong impression, and that impression would be a little counteracted if the author were known to be a *woman*." The *anonymity* of her early essays and the *pseudonymity* of her novels are both signs of her attempt to break free from the

Victorian "laws" of gender, to speak and write beyond the terms of a sexual distinction that deprived women's writing and the reception of that writing of their intellectual force.

Yet, if she aimed for an impersonal authority, disguised by the name of a man, the episodes of her life and the events of her time made it impossible for her to forget the special burdens of being a woman. The opprobrium that attached to her relationship with Lewes and the general agitation over the rights and responsibilities of women forced her to meet an issue she often preferred to avoid. During the early stages of *Middlemarch* she confided to a correspondent that "There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the 'Women Question.' It seems to me to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst." Then she goes on to say: "do not let any one else see this note. I have been made rather miserable lately by revelations about women, and have resolved to remain silent in my sense of helplessness. I know very little about what is specially good for women – only a few things that I feel sure are good for human nature generally" (4 Oct 1869).

Middlemarch itself is a long, long testimony to her *inability* to hold her peace, her need to discover a form of speech suitable to the Woman Question. Yet, her hesitation is not surprising. On one side stands her resolute traditionalism, her desire to preserve ancestral forms of life that belong to the organic history of our species. On the other side stands the glaring example of her own life, her sharp uncompromising break with the conventions of marriage, her refusal to submit to oppressive customs. Her very success as a moral sage made clear that the rude dismissals of woman's intellectual insufficiency were inadequate. Yet her own example was not enough to persuade her that the ideology of "separate spheres" was obsolete. In an 1868 letter to Emily Davies, one of the most active supporters of the feminist cause, George Eliot praised the "spiritual wealth" that was a product of the "physiological differences between women and men," and she spoke of the need to preserve gentleness and tenderness as the distinctive emotional province of women. Notoriously,

she refused to support John Stuart Mill's attempt to extend the vote to women, speaking of the suffrage as "an extremely doubtful good."

Still, all this is not to imply that George Eliot capitulated to the prevailing devaluations of women's talent. It is rather to suggest the fearful impasse of her social and cultural position, the position of a woman artist leading a revolutionary life while enshrining the virtues of tradition. The revealing essay of 1856, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," which was written just before she began her career as a writer of fiction, well expresses the acute difficulties of writing as a woman in the middle of the nineteenth century. Most of the essay – and it is important to remember that it too was presented from the more secure vantage point of anonymity – is an attack on the "composite order of feminine fatuity" in novel writing, a mixed product of "the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic." It becomes difficult to resist the implication that the two halves of the essay's title are more than contingently related, that George Eliot means us to see silliness as the particular domain of lady novelists. But then in the last pages of the essay she works to resist that implication. Thinking no doubt of Austen and the Brontës, she recalls the remarkable success of past female writers. In a characteristic maneuver she opposes the vulgarity of the present with the dignity of the past, a dignity expressed in the recognition by great women novelists of their "precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience." It is a celebrated phrase, and one helpful way to think about *Middlemarch* is to see it as an extended and rigorous meditation on the speciality of women. What is that precious speciality? How may it prosper?

Rosamond Vincy, the prize pupil of Mrs. Lemon's finishing school, is offered as an epitome of what nineteenth-century society seeks in its women: "a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability" (III, 27). As the novel insistently reminds us, Rosamond is a social achievement, a cultural construction, a product of refined artifice; at Mrs. Lemon's school "the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female – even to extras, such as the getting

in and out of a carriage" (I, 11). It is the assumption of Lydgate, and the sexual ideology surrounding him, that Rosamond's "perfect womanhood" is essentially that of a docile, pliable, submissive being, "an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them" (IV, 36). The great turn in their marriage, and the crucial turn in George Eliot's attack on modern femininity, is that Rosamond proves to be, not the mild wife submitting to the husband's greater power, but the worthy antagonist with unsuspected powers of her own. For George Eliot – in what is perhaps the most disturbing of her conclusions on the subject of gender – the great problem posed by the Woman Question was not the indignity suffered by women who must surrender their strength to men; it was rather the cruelty and moral violence concealed beneath the myth of submission, leading the "accomplished female" to become the mirror image of the powerful male. With horror Lydgate comes to realize that "his will was not a whit stronger than hers" and that "As to saying that he was master, it was not the fact" (VII, 64). And when he understands the irretrievable failure of their marriage, we read that "He wished to excuse everything in her if he could – but it was inevitable that in that excusing mood he should think of her as if she were an animal of another and feebler species. Nevertheless she had mastered him" (VII, 65).

The reference to the animal species in this climactic passage is too conspicuous to ignore. It points us to one further element in the intellectual context of *Middlemarch*, namely the looming influence of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Studying the book with the greatest attention, George Eliot read it alongside Lewes whose own work in biology let him be a useful guide to Darwin's technicalities. In 1868, with *Middlemarch* on the verge of conception, Lewes published a series of articles on Darwin in the *Fortnightly Review*, which, as Gillian Beer has persuasively argued, were the discursive source of George Eliot's imaginative appropriation of Darwin's ideas. Beer points out that no notion has greater pertinence to the workings of *Middlemarch* than Darwin's recognition that individuals can always escape from the types and classes

we construct for them. Our notions of species represent our attempt to tame and fix the rich variety of nature. Or, in Lewes' words, "Species, except as a subjective classification of resemblances, has no existence. Only individuals with variable resemblances exist;" and in this thought about the taxonomy of species, George Eliot found her way back to the question of woman.

The "Prelude" to *Middlemarch*, having invoked the epic grandeur of Saint Theresa, turns to the failures of those women who have aspired to grandeur and who have failed.

> Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse.

Here is George Eliot's Darwinian feminism: a refusal to accept Woman as a fixed essence. When Lydgate first meets Rosamond Vincy he thinks, "That is what a woman ought to be" (I, 11), and he rejoices in her "distinctive womanhood." This is one way of classifying the species – as "polished, refined, docile" (II, 16); later, when he begins to class Rosamond as the "animal of another and feebler species," he has radically changed his definition of the species. But in both instances, the telling move is Lydgate's impulse to generalize and to determine the essential character of femininity.

Of Dorothea, Lydgate initially feels that she "did not look at things from the proper feminine angle" (I, 11). From the standpoint of the usual sexual conventions, Dorothea appears as a sport of nature, an oddity, even a freak. But by the end of the novel Lydgate's faint distaste will turn into the reverent perception that "She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before"(VIII, 76). Through the gloriously opposing instance of Dorothea, *Middlemarch* offers a vehement repudiation of the species "Woman," as nineteenth-century England had come to construct her. And yet in her critique of the politics of gender, George Eliot could not follow her

feminist friends, could not call for the invention of new worlds for women that would break decisively with the old. This is in part because she could not accept Lewes' sharp distinction between the species and the individual, and so could not imagine progress merely through the liberation of particular individuals, especially women, from the false constraints of species. In the exacting spirit of her radical traditionalism, she wanted to escape the pernicious construction of a feminine species, not by reaching toward an unconstrained future, but by recovering certain productive constraints of the past. It is not that Dorothea is an unprecedented individual who cannot be sorted according to any classification; it is that *different* classes are required. So, in the opening description in the "Prelude," she is linked to the "cygnet [who] is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind." Hers is not the common kind; but it is a kind nonetheless, the kind, for instance, of those many Theresas who have lived since their Spanish original. Yet, in good Darwinian fashion, George Eliot sees Dorothea not merely as the latest, the most up-to-date, example of the fixed Theresan essence, but as the representative of a species transformed by her encounters with a changing environment. Dorothea Brooke, obliged to live outside a time and place in which she might flourish, obliged rather to live in the unpropitious circumstances of the early nineteenth century, can be neither simply a member of her noble kind, nor simply an individual. She is a hybrid, whose suffering and whose greatness derive from the fact that human beings cannot surrender themselves to their eternal essences but must live and change in history.

1830 and the novel as history

Because there survive a large number of notebook jottings made during the writing of *Middlemarch*, it is possible to get a firm sense of what it meant to George Eliot to situate her novel in history. She was a tireless researcher who saw reading as a great stimulus to writing. But what most stands out in any consideration of the *Middlemarch* notebooks is the range

of her reading and the diversity of her interests. Law, medicine, poetry, astronomy, philology, politics – she gave careful attention to all of these subjects, dutifully copying quotations and noting facts. Indeed the notebooks are predominantly books of Fact, inspired by George Eliot's robust sense of material existence, her evident delight in the contingent details of worldly life for their own sake. So amidst the notes on striking events in the history of Europe, she suddenly records without context the fact that "Some mushrooms yield 60,000 spores in a minute." The delight in the actual, no matter how mean and humble the actuality, is essential to her sense of the life of human beings within historical time.

The constellation of particular facts that surround and penetrate particular lives tends to be identified in George Eliot's writing by the term "condition," a word that seems to convey to her a sense of the inevitable *circumstantiality* of living – the recognition, as she put it in *Felix Holt*, that "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life." In an essay of the mid-1860s she suggests that if superstition has waned in recent centuries, it is not because the multitude of human beings have developed stronger inward capacities of reason, but because of what she calls "external Reason – the sum of conditions resulting from the laws of material growth." Among those conditions are "the increase of population, the rejection of convicts by our colonies, [and] the exhaustion of the soil by cotton plantations." The pressures of circumstance have roused people out of their irrational superstition, and while "external Reason" does not predetermine our inner lives, it is for George Eliot the medium in which we move, the medium which colors our sensations and our emotions, and which we ignore at our great peril.

Once George Eliot had settled on provincial life during the period of the First Reform Bill as the historical site of her ambitious novel, she undertook to articulate the specific "conditions" of life at this apparent threshold to modernity. Her intention was not to establish some hierarchy of social pressures but to record the diversity of circumstances impinging

on individual destinies, and also the destiny of small social groups. She investigated the spread of cholera through Europe in the early 1830s; she noted the coming of the railroads to the English countryside; she recorded small details of provincial taste in clothes, in slang, in poetry; she incorporated references to the new biblical criticism that had so deeply affected her own provincial experience; and in countless ways she set out to evoke the habits and customs of this particular place at this particular time.

In her studied, even relentless, effort to recreate the web of conditions characterizing an historical moment, George Eliot gave special attention to two large areas of concern, both well represented in her surviving notebook entries. The first is the rise of medical science which she studied carefully in various histories of medicine and in the pages of the medical journal, *The Lancet*. It is not surprising that this subject should have interested her so greatly. Given her strong commitments to the emancipation of reason from superstition, and her Comtean perception that theology and metaphysics must give way to positive research, she naturally found the case of medicine in the early nineteenth century to be highly suggestive. On the one side, there was the exhilarating movement from pernicious fakery to modern science. Here the late eighteenth-century French physiologist Bichat occupied a special place. For George Eliot, and equally for Lydgate, Bichat stands as the harbinger of a new rigorous science that should give strong foundations to the archaic structure of medical practice: "the conception wrought out by Bichat" (thinks Lydgate), "with his detailed study of the different tissues, acted necessarily on medical questions as the turning of a gas-light would act on a dim, oil-lit street, showing new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure which must be taken into account in considering the symptoms of maladies and the action of medicaments" (II, 15). But Lydgate immediately goes on to reflect that "now at the end of 1829, most medical practice was still strutting or shambling along the old paths," and this gives the other side of George Eliot's interest in medicine: namely, the obstacles in the way of enlightened science. Much of her research and much of the